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ABSTRACT

The National Center for Education Statistics conducted a survey of 1,843 public elementary schools that focused on both general education and special education prekindergarten characteristics of the students, classes, personnel, funding sources, and support services. This document summarizes findings relating to prekindergarten special education classes for students with disabilities. Findings indicate: (1) 20% of schools offered general education prekindergarten classes only, 8% offered special education prekindergarten classes only, and 8% offered both general education and prekindergarten classes; (2) the average number of children in prekindergarten general education classes was 17 compared with 9 children per class in prekindergarten special education classes; (3) large public elementary schools were more likely to offer prekindergarten special education classes; (4) public elementary schools in the southeast were more likely to offer prekindergarten special education classes; (5) schools where minority enrollment was 21% or higher were more likely to offer prekindergarten special education classes; (6) overall, 30% of children enrolled in public elementary school prekindergarten classes had individualized education programs (IEPs); and (7) schools with the lowest poverty rate served a higher proportion of prekindergarten children with IEPs than schools with the highest poverty rate. (CR)

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Prekindergarten Special Education Classes in U.S. Public Schools
NASDSE Synthesis Brief

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Synthesis Brief

Prekindergarten Special Education Classes in U.S. Public Schools

Synthesized by Terry L. Jackson and Joy Markowitz Project FORUM at NASDSE June 2003

Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted the "Survey of Classes that Serve Children Prior to Kindergarten in Public Schools: 2000-2001." The survey focused on both general education and special education prekindergarten characteristics of the students, classes, personnel, funding sources and support services in U.S. public elementary schools. Approximately 2,000 public elementary schools were sent surveys and a total of 1,843 schools responded to the survey. The results of this research are presented in the March 2003 NCES report *Prekindergarten in U.S. Public Schools: 2000-2001.*[1]

The purpose of this document is to provide a brief summary of NCES' major findings relating specifically to prekindergarten special education classes for students with disabilities as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In this study, special education classes for prekindergarten children were defined as classes that serve only children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

[1] Smith, T., Kleiner, A., Parsad, B., Farris, E., & Greene, B. (2003). *Prekindergarten in U.S. Public Schools: 2000-2001.* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. This document is available on line at http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003019

The NCES study did not collect information on the type and amount of special education services provided to pre-kindergarten children with IEPs or other settings in which services may have been provided (e.g., home, daycare).

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Key Findings from NCES Report

Public Schools with Prekindergarten Special Education Classes

During the 2000-2001 school year, there were about 56,400 public elementary schools in the U.S. Twenty percent offered general education prekindergarten classes only, eight percent offered special education prekindergarten classes only, and eight offered both general education and prekindergarten classes. Sixty-five percent of all public elementary schools did not offer prekindergarten classes.[2]

[2] Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding.

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Of the 19,900 public schools that offered prekindergarten classes, 57 percent offered no special education prekindergarten classes. Eighteen percent offered one special education class, 16 percent two special education classes and nine percent offered three or more special education classes.

The average number of children in prekindergarten general education classes was 17, compared with nine children per class in prekindergarten special education classes.

Large public elementary schools were more likely to offer prekindergarten special education classes than small public elementary schools. NCES data indicate that 20 percent of large public elementary schools (600 or more students), 16 percent of midsize schools (300-599 students) and 12 percent of small schools (less than 300 students) offered prekindergarten special education classes.

Public elementary schools in the southeast were more likely to offer prekindergarten special education classes than public elementary schools in any other region—23 percent compared with 15 percent in the central region, 14 percent in the west and nine percent in the northeast. However, specific type of locale (e.g., city, urban fringe/large town or rural/small town) was not a factor related to the presence of prekindergarten special education classes.

Public elementary schools where minority enrollment was 21 percent or higher were more likely to offer prekindergarten special education classes than schools with low minority enrollment (less than 6 percent). See Table 1.

Table 1
Percentage of Public Schools with Prekindergarten Special Education Classes by Minority Enrollment in School

Percentage of Minority Enrollment in School	Percentage of Public Schools with Prekindergarten Special Education Classes
50% or more	18%
21-49	18
6-20	14
< 6	12

There was not a significant difference between public elementary schools with the highest poverty rates (75 percent or greater) and the lowest poverty rates (less than 35 percent) in regard to the percentage that offered prekindergarten special education classes. School poverty rate was measured by the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

Public School Prekindergarten Children with IEPs

Overall, 30 percent of children enrolled in public elementary school prekindergarten classes during the 2000-2001 school year had IEPs. There was no significant difference by school size, locale and region.

Public elementary schools where minority enrollment was the lowest served a higher proportion of prekindergarten children with IEPs than schools where minority enrollment was highest. See Table 2.

Table 2
Percentage of Prekindergarten Children in School with IEPs by Minority Enrollment in School

Percentage of Minority Enrollment in School	Percentage of Prekindergarten Children in School with IEPs
50% or more	23%
21-49	31
6-20	38
< 6	36

Public elementary schools with the lowest poverty rate served a higher proportion of prekindergarten children with IEPs than schools with the highest poverty rate. See Table 3.

Table 3
Percentage of Prekindergarten Children in School with IEPs by Percentage of Low-Income Students in School

Percentage of Low-Income Students in School	Percentage of Prekindergarten Children in School with IEPs
75% or more	20%
50-74	30
35-49	38
< 35	40

Public School Prekindergarten Children in Special Education Classes

Of the total number of prekindergarten children with IEPs, 31 percent were in general education prekindergarten classes and sixty-nine percent were in special education prekindergarten classes.

In addition, of the 822,000 children enrolled in public elementary school prekindergarten classes, 21 percent were enrolled in special education classes and therefore had IEPs, while 79 percent were enrolled in general education classes.

The percentage of children enrolled in prekindergarten special education classes was not related to size of the school or minority enrollment in the school, but differed by region of the country. The percentage of children enrolled in prekindergarten special education classes was lowest in the northwest region of the country (14 percent) and highest in the southeast (24 percent). The percentages in the central and western regions were 22 and 20, respectively.

A lower percentage of public elementary school prekindergarten children were served in special education classes in schools with the highest poverty rate than in schools with the lowest poverty rate. See Table 4.

Table 4
Percentage of Prekindergarten Children Enrolled in Special Education Classes by Percentage of Low-Income Students in School

Percentage of Low-Income Students in School	Percentage of Prekindergarten Children Enrolled in Special Education Classes
75% or more	13%
50-74	23
35-49	22
< 35	27

Of the children enrolled in prekindergarten special education classes, 42 percent were three years old or younger. In contrast, only 18 percent of the children enrolled in general prekindergarten classes were three years old or younger.

Concluding Remarks

This study provides important descriptive information about prekindergarten public elementary school special education classes across the country and the characteristics of the schools that offer such classes. These data also raise critical policy questions about the percentage of public elementary schools that offer only prekindergarten special education classes, the differences by school characteristics and the percentage of students with disabilities served in general prekindergarten classes. For example, why do schools with higher poverty rates and higher percentages of minority students serve a smaller percentage of prekindergarten children with IEPs? Similarly, schools with higher poverty rates enroll a smaller percentage of prekindergarten children in special education classes. What other factors are associated with these data (e.g., availability of prekindergarten classes for all students)? These and other questions point to the need for further examination of the topics addressed by the NCES study.

As noted earlier, this NCES study was not designed to examine the nature of services provided to children with disabilities in prekindergarten classes. Nor was it designed to collect information about non-classroom settings in which prekindergarten-age children with disabilities receive services. Comprehensive service data will be available from the Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study (PEELS), funded by OSEP.[3]

[3] See www.peels.org.

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